

“THE PILL”

Most recently there has been much information disseminated through the media about the recent decision made by the American Congress of Obstetrician's And Gynecologists (of which I am the New York Vice Chair) to allow birth control pills (“the pill”) to become an over the counter medication that will not require a doctor's prescription. To understand and discuss this discussion there needs to be some information about the history and mechanism of birth control pills. They were invented around fifty years ago and work to prevent pregnancy by preventing ovulation. They also thicken the cervical mucus thereby preventing sperm from ascending through the uterus into the fallopian tubes where fertilization occurs. They also help protect against certain types of cancer such as cancer of the ovary and endometrium and experts agree that women who have no other risk factors do not have an increased risk of getting breast cancer. The pill also helps to keep periods regular, lighter, and shorter. Coincidental to the time that the pill was introduced the Pap smear became an available and proven method to detect and prevent cancer of the cervix. Hence, most women associated coming to the gynecologist for birth control to be accompanied by a Pap smear, breast exam, and general wellness visit. The benefit was not only a prevention of unintended pregnancies but a culture of wellness with cervical cancer becoming a disease of history, breast cancer being detected early, and well women exams becoming routine with prevention and diagnosis of other non gynecologic illnesses such as osteoporosis, colo-rectal cancer, vaccinations and preconception counseling. Critics decried a sexual revolution that would be ushered in theorizing that promiscuity would rise amid a hedonistic society. This can be debated but there is no question that the cost of contraception and the reluctance of the younger generation to go to the gynecologist have resulted in a surge of unintended pregnancies of over 70%. The need to see a physician or other clinician to get a prescription can be a barrier to constant use. While no drug is completely without risk, when the relative risks versus the relative benefits are considered the consensus is that the pill is safe for most women. ACOG believes that the evidence shows that women can self screen for contraindications and may even be more conservative than their physicians when choosing the pill. Of course, changing from prescription to non prescription will require action by the FDA (food and drug administration) so this might be a long time until enactment. It is THOUGHT that women who get the pill without a prescription will still be very likely to receive needed screening for breast and cervical cancer and sexually transmitted diseases. I take exception to this thought. My patients have made it very clear that if not for needing a prescription they would forego a pap and pelvic exam. When asked of Pharmacists, they do not support this plan either as they will be overwhelmed explaining the side effects and will take on added liability. Will a young woman who smokes, thereby increasing her risk of heart attack when taking the pill, have the will power to not pick the pill off the counter? Until women are fully educated about “wellness” I feel that over the counter birth control pills are a bad idea and a huge step backward. ACOG has an excellent well woman website that is accessible to the public. Yes, birth control pills have been shown to be safe and with relatively less side effects

than pregnancy but the doctor visit itself to get this prescription has markedly reduced cancer, heart disease, osteoporosis, colon cancer and panoply of other diseases that would be missed without an exam. I have made a career of wellness for women both in my practice and legislatively and feel that birth control pills should remain a prescription drug until a new culture of education and information is widespread. Failure to do so might results in fewer pregnancies but at an increased cost of many other illnesses.